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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the role of college and university class scheduling in meeting the needs of its students. It first discusses the balancing of schedules in order to satisfy not only student needs, but also faculty interests and the administrative concerns relative to facility availability and funding support. Surveys are suggested as a good way of assessing student desires in scheduling. Next, class scheduling is discussed in terms of academic management; several suggestions are presented for managing scheduling conflicts, class size problems, and the proper use of available resources. Scheduling design and facilities usage are then discussed, and an example is given on how to handle facility underutilization and alleviating the physical crunch on classroom facilities at peak times. The final section of the paper examines an area where scheduling design can be especially innovative: weekend programs. Time frames, the types of students who attend, and the advantages and disadvantages of weekend programs are discussed. Contains a 13-item bibliography. (GLR)

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CLASS SCHEDULING: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INNOVATION

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INTRODUCTION

Innovation in class scheduling can be risky business. Some projects will prove successful; others will not. Experimentation is, however, fundamental to the college experience. Once an experiment has been executed, the findings must be studied to determine effectiveness of the approach. In the case of innovative course scheduling, it is the institution's clientele, its students, that will ultimately determine the success or failure of the innovation.

Institutions of higher education are known for their differences, not their similarities (Algren & Hockenberger, 1986). Critical to the survival of any college or university are the images perceived when the institution's name is mentioned (Toper, 1983). One area available to schools desiring a more positive, responsive image is that of class scheduling. Institutions can advantage themselves through the offering of flexible class time schedules, convenient locations for course offerings, and classes designed to meet the needs and learning styles of target student groups.

Alternative scheduling systems are a means by which colleges can both

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respond to demands for accountability and adapt to declining enrollments and financial problems (Mabry, 1988). Consideration of new scheduling formats and calendars is a natural consequence of the unique demands placed on schools by different types of students. Innovative scheduling is especially necessary in any attempt at facilitating the successful return to formal study of the growing population of adult students (Austin & Others, 1988). Meeting the educational requirements of business and government - at the point of their needs rather than at the point of the institution's - is likely also to require new class scheduling formats.

Determination of a scheduling format most appropriate for its own situation requires that an institution know its target student groups. The institution must understand the characteristics, needs, and goals of each target group. Students preferences relative to class times, number of classes per week, duration of individual class sessions, and length of semesters should be known (Campbell & Smith, 1985). Interest in new locations for course offerings and even in new programs of study should also be ascertained. Where appropriate, these preferences should be given strong consideration in the planning process. Once target populations are identified and studied, the work really has just begun. Faculty cooperation must then be gained, courses organized, budgets developed, support services schedules adjusted, promotions readied, etc., in order to successfully implement the scheduling changes (East, 1988).

What follows is a discussion of various issues related to class scheduling. Scheduling design represents an opportunity for institutions to build schedules that as much as possible meet the needs of their clientele within the available resource base. Weekend programming efforts are an area where scheduling design is being utilized in an innovative fashion to meet market demands.

SCHEDULING DESIGN ISSUES

Scheduling design to meet student needs. Course schedules must be designed to meet student needs. With the growth of non-traditional and part-time student groups comes a greater need for different scheduling patterns, as often times these groups have different needs than traditional students. Attracting and retaining new target groups requires that an institution develop new course scheduling patterns and then launch effective promotional efforts to reach these groups (Thompson, 1985). For example, the academic week might be expanded in length and/or courses might be offered at off-campus sites. Whatever the adjustments, the key to expanding the schedule - into afternoons, evenings, weekends, through the use of short-term sessions, etc. - is to discover the specific courses desired by students at those times (Campbell & Smith, 1985). While not all courses will academically "fit" all scheduling formats, student achievement has been shown - in some

instances - to not be adversely affected by various scheduling formats (Austin & Others, 1988; Scott & Conrad, 1991). It is in those cases where alternative formats should be considered.

The design of class schedules would of course be a much simpler process if "student needs" were the only item of consideration. But reality is that scheduling design involves a balancing of student needs with faculty interests and with administrative concerns relative to facilities availability and funding support levels (Sworder, 1986). While decisions should focus on benefiting a school's primary service group - its students, it must also be recognized that no schedule will meet the first choice needs of the entire student population. However, several studies have shown that scheduling conflicts can cause lost enrollments (Sworder, 1986). Therefore, every effort should be made to minimize the conflicts when possible.

Surveys are often quite useful instruments in an effort to discover student desires relative to class scheduling. They can be helpful in determining both preferred class times and times at which students simply cannot or will not attend class. For example, a survey at Montgomery College found that only nine percent of the students surveyed considered afternoons to be the most convenient class time. Full-time and day students were found to have a preference for morning classes, while part-time students preferred evening classes (Campbell & Smith, 1985). Without this type of base information concerning student

preferences, an institution's attempt to alter scheduling format has the potential to be so misdirected that no amount of marketing will bring success.

Scheduling design as an academic management issue. Scheduling is very much an academic management issue. Blakesley (1982) proposes that responsible scheduling take a positive approach, focusing on the opportunities present. Blakesley makes numerous suggestions that can be quite helpful and are worthy of mention: Ideally, classes should neither be too large nor too small due to scheduling constraints, and class cancellations should be kept to a minimum. The need to extend the academic week can be lessened and scheduling conflicts can be reduced if class times are standardized. Scheduling classes throughout the hours of the day and days of the week is another useful method for minimizing conflicts. While the tendancy in scheduling design is to collapse the schedule into as few hours as possible, thereby avoiding "unpopular" time periods, this is not the best approach. Schedules so designed provide neither the best academic opportunities nor do they represent the best use of available resources.

Blakesley (1982) also suggests that multi-sectioned courses provide an excellent opportunity for minimizing overall scheduling conflicts. When these courses are scheduled throughout as many different time periods as possible, the opportunity to reduce the length of the needed academic week will again present itself. Should additional course sections be

added, they should be added during low use times (Thompson, 1985). Increase in peak period use should be avoided. As opposed to multi-sectioned courses, large, single-section classes require the needed academic week to be longer. Time selection for these courses therefore becomes critical, as the selected time will have an impact on all associated curricula. Scheduling conflicts can become commonplace.

Scheduling design and facilities usage. The availability of facilities is a prime consideration in the scheduling of courses. A class scheduling system developed at Brevard Community College (BCC) recognized the facilities issue in its attempt to improve the environment for teaching and learning (Pollock, 1984). The Brevard system was predicated on the belief that a schedule which places an overemphasis on mid-morning time-slots can lead to oversubscribed classes at those time periods and class cancellations at most other periods. The imbalance created will then result in underutilized facilities and fewer visits to faculty offices. By dispersing class times, BCC found it could alleviate the physical crunch on classroom facilities at peak times. With a reduction in the number of extremely large course sections came the opportunity for increased lab and learning facilities usage as well as increased student/faculty interaction. Increased levels of interaction between faculty and students were seen as having the potential to reduce student attrition rates (Pollock, 1984).

The scheduling design utilized by Brevard Community College basically was one which spread classes more evenly throughout the day, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Department heads were asked to schedule only one class in each time slot until all slots were filled. Then, second classes could be scheduled in each period until all periods had two classes, etc. Two sections of any multi-sectioned course were not permitted to be offered during the same time slot until the course first appeared once in all other time periods. The resulting reduction in physical facilities constraints was seen as providing an improved educational environment with the opportunity for increased levels of interaction between students and faculty (Pollock, 1984).

The next section of this paper looks at an area where scheduling design can be especially innovative. Weekend programs are being utilized to reach new target groups as well as to better serve specific segments of the current student population. They also offer institutions the occasion to more fully utilize existing physical plant resources.

WEEKEND PROGRAMS

Definition and time frames. There is no such thing as a typical weekend program (Watkins, 1989). Weekend programs display a great variation in size, structure, content, and location of offerings. East (1988) developed a categorization of weekend program types which recognizes the

great variation present:

comprehensive programs
satellite weekend colleges
interactive, interdisciplinary weekend programs
graduate weekend programs
shopping center weekend colleges
weekend college in residence

Some of the above program types include delivery methods other than those present in the "traditional" type of academic course. Included among the different approaches are workshops, TV courses, group and individual study arrangements, and conferences or seminars.

Weekend programs also display great variation with respect to the time periods included as part of the "weekend" effort (East, 1988). Quite common are programs that utilize only Saturday time periods. However, other programs offer courses in various combinations of Friday evening, Saturday morning and afternoon, and Sunday morning, afternoon, and evening. The few programs that do include Sunday offerings generally start the courses in the afternoon.

Who attends? The diversity found in weekend college programs makes it important for each institution to determine individually the types of students making up their potential weekend market. Are the students older?, employed part- or full-time?, new, reentry, or continuing students?, male or female? minority? Nationally, enrollment in weekend offerings is still small, with just three percent of all students being enrolled in weekend programs (Watkins, 1989). However, institutions would be wise to recognize that new students, whose first exposure to a

school is the result of enrollment in a weekend program, potentially represent a signficant pool of college majors (East, 1988). New students will continue to be attracted to weekend programs as long as the programs provide quality courses at convenient times and in accessible locations.

Advantages, weekend programs. Weekend programs can prove advantageous both for the students enrolled in the programs and for the institutions providing them (Mischler & Moss, 1986; Mabry, 1988; East, 1988).

Advantages for the student include:

* Child care needs can often times more easily be met on the weekend
* Students can come to class "fresh" rather than exhausted after the day's work
* Students who live and work too far from campus to attend during the week, can attend on weekends
* "Traditional" students can accelerate degree completion
* Weekend classes allow for more productive use of lesiure time
* Weekend classes for professional advancement often fit the adult worker's schedule better
* Parking on campus is much more readily available on weekends
* The campus is less "hectic" on weekends for adult students attempting to return to the educational setting

Advantages for the institution include:

* Facilities fully scheduled during the week are available on weekends
* Additional students can be added to an institution's total enrollment
* Allows scheduling flexibility for both full- and part-time faculty
* Necessary instructional support materials more readily available on the weekends
* Weekend courses provide alternative scheduling for regular students

Disadvantages, weekend programs. Weekend programs also come with disadvantages when compared with the more traditional school week (Watkins, 1989; Campbell & Smith, 1985, Mabry, 1988; Mischler & Moss,

1986):

* Most adults prefer to keep their weekends free. What is being offered is an alternative; not an easy solution
* Weekends have been found to be the LEAST convenient time for classes for full-time, day, and day/evening students
* The weekend represents the most rejected time for classes. Only a very small percentage of students prefer weekend classes
* Retention rates may also suffer. A survey at William Rainey Harper College found that even though weekend students rated their courses as being more beneficial, these courses suffered the highest rates of withdrawal
* Many institutions cannot afford the expansion of support services that must accompany a separate weekend program. (Thus, many institutions simply expand their traditional offerings into the weekend period rather than create a separate weekend program)

Sample weekend program courses. Many of the courses offered on weekends will parallel courses taught in more traditional time sequencing formats. However, weekends also offer an excellent opportunity to experiment with innovative courses. For example, one- and two-credit hour courses (often taught in an "intensive" or "short-term" format) are quite common in weekend programs. These courses have the potential to be very popular. They are less intimidating to students who are either new to the experience of higher education, or first returning after an extended absence. This is so because they represent less of a commitment on the part of the student. At the same time, they generally are not as much of a financial burden as would be a typical three-credit hour class (East, 1988).

Considering a weekend program. Meeting the needs of students should be the primary motivation behind establishment of a weekend college program. Mischler & Moss (1986) speak to the necessity of determining

the characteristics and preferences of weekend students. It is important for an institution to know what its students feel is working and what needs changing about the weekend programming effort, from the course offerings themselves to the attempts at promoting the offerings. A school would also be well served to determine if the weekend program is simply drawing students away from current programs, or if it is in fact attracting new students. East (1988) suggests that the most fundamental question that colleges and universities must ask themselves relative to the establishment of a weekend program is if such an effort is compatible with the institutional mission. Only when this question can be answered affirmatively should feasibility studies be undertaken, courses designed, support services levels determined, and programs marketed.

SUMMARY

Class scheduling design represents an opportunity for institutions interested in improving service to their student clientele. Through innovative class scheduling, institutions can demonstrate their concern for the educational needs present, along with their willingness to address these needs. Like all innovative efforts, the results attained must be assessed to determine what works and what doesn't with an eye for changing what doesn't. The institution inclined to make this effort displays a responsive image that will serve it well.

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